

DOD SURVEY SETS STAGE FOR REDUCING ACCIDENTS

By Marvin V. Greene, associate editor



In 2003, Department of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld challenged senior department officials to reduce preventable accidents 50 percent over a two-year period. "World-class organizations do not tolerate preventable accidents," Rumsfeld said.

This is no small feat, considering the department ranks as the nation's largest employer – with 3.5 million military and civilian personnel worldwide – and had an accidental fatality rate for military personnel of 30.3 per 100,000 people in fiscal year 1999. In fact, the annual cost of injuries and illnesses for the department ranges conservatively from \$10 billion to more than \$21 billion, according to National Safety Council estimates.

So where do you begin when your boss issues such a directive? Remaking policies on safety and reducing preventable accidents required a fresh approach, according to Col. Forrest R. Sprester, Air Force division chief for homeland defense/security, engineering and environment, and safety and occupational health in the Inspector General's office of the Department of Defense. Sprester and Assistant Inspector General William Brem Morrison III headed up the team of department officers and civilians evaluating military safety and health.

Photos: DOD



DOD safety snapshot: fiscal year 2002

Military deaths:	554
Military injuries:	1.25 million
Motor vehicle fatalities:	310
Civilian deaths:	28 <i>(not counting Sept 11, 2001)</i>
Civilian injuries:	218,000 lost days
Workers' compensation costs:	\$619 million
Destroyed aircraft:	67
Aviation deaths:	66
Contractor deaths:	15

Source: Department of Defense

They began by launching an extensive perception survey administered by the National Safety Council's Research and Statistical Services Department in 2005. The results were released this year.

Not surprisingly, the senior leaders had the most positive perception of the military's safety program. However, nearly one-third of active duty respondents said increased stress levels and the intense pace of operations in the workplace were causing increased off-duty accidents. Civilian workers employed by the department had the lowest perception of the military's ability to keep them safe at work.

While the senior leaders were positive overall about safety, they nonetheless were skeptical in the other areas. They questioned the adequacy of resources to manage and support safety programs, the extent of cooperation among all branches of the military on safety-related issues, and the ability to reduce accidents 50 percent in two years.

Nonetheless, the department is moving toward a zero tolerance philosophy on safety – whether or not it actually can be achieved, according to Morrison. In fact, the department's goal has been raised to a 75 percent reduction by 2008 since the perception surveys were completed. Accepting zero tolerance is part of a transformation that is occurring on occupational and off-the-job safety in the military going forward, Morrison said.

To accomplish this type of reduction, the department had to move from simply documenting mishaps to preventing them, according to Sprester. "I think what the secretary is looking at is a step beyond compliance," Sprester said. Morrison agreed. A mindset of prevention rather than just collecting and presenting data on mishaps "seems to be working. We seem to be getting people to better understand this is where we can make a difference now," Morrison said.

Results to date

So has the new initiative been effective? The Navy met the 50 percent reduction in more than 70 percent of targeted areas by the end of calendar year 2004. The Marine Corps reduced aviation mishaps 76 percent in fiscal year 2004. And motor vehicle fatalities decreased 30 percent since fiscal 2002.

The department maintains a comprehensive traffic safety program to address the fact that motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for military personnel. Motor vehicle crashes accounted for 310 fatalities among military personnel in fiscal 2002, according to department statistics.

The Department of Defense's safety perception survey is available online at www.dodig.mil/Inspections/IE/safetyproject.html.

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